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AUTHOR Bartlett, Carol
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ABSTRACT

Observations are offered regarding differences between the academic persistence, academic achievement, and general learning behaviors of male and female students in job skills classes for physical plant and security employees at a state university. Greater numbers of women tended to enroll in and continue attending classes. The men tended to enroll for a specific purpose, such as gaining the literacy skills needed to obtain a driver's license or learning enough math to take the General Educational Development tests. The women attending classes were more likely to be motivated by a desire to keep on learning or to help their children and grandchildren. The men were more likely to follow directions and stick to one task until they master it, whereas the women were more likely to dabble (in other words, work on one task for a while and then pick up something else to work on for a while). Although the women did not fit into a school model of mastery and testing, they kept attending class and did make progress. The Bible proved to be a powerful book for both the men and women, and members of both sexes read Bible stories in class. (MN)

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Center for the Study of Adult Literacy

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SEEING: GENDER and LITERACY

Let me begin with a story. Two women, who work night shift for the physical plant, clean bathrooms in one of the buildings on campus. They say that men working late will come in and urinate while the women are cleaning the men's room and will never notice them, or, never take notice of them. The door is propped open with their bucket. It is clear they are there. At first they said they were horrified and a bit frightened; then they realized the men didn't "see" them. I might add that these two women "see" the men.

This is a story about seeing, about gender, and about men's and women's spaces. When I began working in a program with employees in the physical plant at Georgia State, there were many things I didn't see, only one of them being the need for men's spaces and women's spaces.

The program for custodial staff began with night-shift employees in the winter of 1992 and with day-shift employees in the summer of 1992. All physical plant employees wear uniforms; shirt color designates the type of work they perform. The custodians wear blue shirts, a public notice that the wearer is a custodian. The uniforms underplay gender differences. Everyone wears pants, sturdy shoes and a blue shirt. Custodians do domestic work. They clean, mop, sweep, take out the trash, and move the furniture. It is work traditionally done by women. Everyone dresses like a man, but does a woman's work.

In both classes we began with more women than men. We did no testing, but it was clear that some of the participants were barely literate while others had some college or technical school. The men who were barely literate left fairly soon. The women who were barely literate stayed. In both the night class and the afternoon class, we went from a few men to no men.

After a year, in both classes, men started coming again--new men. They came to get driver's licenses, to get the GED, to learn computers; the general goal was to get a better job. A number of men passed through the class. They were focused on learning something quite specific, often not having the background to learn that thing; for example, wanting a driver's license but not being able to read. Most did not stay long enough to get the driver's license or learn enough math to take the GED.

Almost all of the men and women who have stayed are middle-aged with grown children and grandchildren. There is one young man in the class who came to work on his GED. He works alone, socializing with neither the men nor the women.

One year into the program a barely literate man came to each class and stayed. One of the men spends one day a week reading the Bible and one day a week reading job-related material. The other man works on spelling and handwriting. I have heard stories about a number of illiterate men who work in the physical plant. They have not come to the class.

The man who is the leader in the afternoon class, who greets everyone and is clearly in charge, arrived a year after the class began. He was told by supervision that if he didn't come and work on his GED,

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he would not be promoted. He distanced himself immediately from the women and now works in a separate room. The other men in that class sit with him. There is now a women's room, a men's room, and a mixed room with two or three people who work by themselves.

The men in the men's room read and then talk about the material they are reading. They are reading the social studies section of the GED and the newspaper, *News for You.* Their conversations are about current political situations and the workings of government. The closest I have heard the women in the women's room ever talk about content, is when they work together on a crossword puzzle and talk about words.

The men will follow directions and go where I suggest. They will generally stick to one thing until they get it. The women dabble. If I get pushy, they will disappear for a few weeks or just stop and pick up something else and work on it for a while. They do a little reading, a little writing, a little math. They keep coming. They don't fit into a school model of mastery and testing. However, they stay and they make progress. One woman wrote notes to her workers for the first time; two women have taken parts of the GED; one woman began writing poetry and had two of her poems published in the campus newspaper; one woman moved out of public housing; one woman is writing her autobiography; several women now have reading glasses.

Their general goals are to keep on learning or to help children and grandchildren. They will say to me over and over again, "You're never too old to keep on learning."

For both the men and women, the Bible is a powerful book. A Bible and books of Bible stories are in the room. Generally, for both men and women, the lower the reading ability, the greater the desire to read the Bible. The man who reads the Bible in class has shown that it's possible to read the Bible in school and now several of the women are also reading Bible stories.

I see more now than I did two years ago, but it is still quite possible that I, like the men in the campus building, am not seeing women who are cleaning the men's room. One woman in the night class said, "We're all learning, aren't we, Carol?" She was definitely including me in the "we."

By Carol Bartlett

Carol Bartlett is a training specialist at Georgia State University. She teaches job skills classes to physical plant and security employees at the University.

Editor's Note

This issue of TEXT focuses on women's literacy issues. It is becoming clear that there are many unanswered questions that are not even being addressed, much less answered. The First International Conference on Women and Literacy announced on the prior page will be a forum to shape the questions regarding women and literacy.

Contact the Center for the Study of Adult Literacy at Georgia State University for more information. Plan to be a part of the group of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, voicing questions and making connections about women's literacies. Paper abstracts are due November 15, 1994.

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